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“Avoir la puce en l’oreille”

Voices of Desire in Alain Chartier’s *Debat Reveille Matin* and Guillaume Alexis’ *Debat de l’omme mondain et du religieux*

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« Avoir la puce en l'oreille » : Voices of Desire in Alain Chartier's *Debat Reveille Matin* and Guillaume Alexis' *Debat de l'homme mondain et du religieux*

*Abstract: The proverb which introduces this article recurs frequently in fifteenth-century French poetry. Pointing both to disquiet and to sexual desire, it stands as a metaphor for the debate vehicle where it is most often found. The male protagonists of Alain Chartier's *Debat Reveille Matin* (c.1423), and the *Debat de l'homme mondain et du religieux*, attributed to Guillaume Alexis (c.1450), both draw on this same source of proverbial wisdom to express their frustrated desire. Desire for intercourse – both physical and verbal – drives the participants of our debates. This leads us to ask how desire may be linked with voice, presence and absence in the text. I demonstrate how « puce » may be understood to inhabit a gender neutral space, criss-crossed by the memory of presence. Through the « oreille » of the text, we overhear the voice(s) of desire at the heart of the debate.*

*Résumé: L'expression qui apparaît en tête de cette contribution revient sans cesse dans la poésie du quinzième siècle. Devenant métaphore dans les débats poétiques, elle exprime aussi bien le désir sexuel que l'inquiétude. Les interlocuteurs du *Debat Reveille Matin* d'Alain Chartier (c. 1423), et du *Debat de l'homme mondain et du religieux*, attribué à Guillaume Alexis (c. 1450), puisent à cette source de sagesse proverbiale afin d'exprimer leur désirs insatisfaits. Le désir de rapports futurs – physiques et conversationnels – motive les participants de nos débats, ce qui nous pousse à nous demander comment le désir est lié à la notion de la voix, de sa présence et de son absence dans le texte. Je démontre ici comment « puce » opère dans un espace neutre, traversé par la mémoire de la présence. À travers « l'oreille » du texte, nous surprenons la/les voix du désir au coeur du débat.*

The proverb or saying, « avoir/mettre la puce en l'oreille » (to have or put a flea in someone's ear) recurs frequently in fifteenth-century French debate poetry. Pointing both to disquiet and to unsatisfied sexual desire, it stands in some sense for the unresolved debate poem where it is most often found, and to the wider game of the text, deliberately perpetuated in order to prolong the painful pleasure of writing. Moreover, this « expression grivoise » has a strong link with the notion of voice within the text. The desire for communion it implies – both physical and verbal – hints at the presence in absence that is the troubling lack at the heart of the debate. This leads us to ask how desire may be linked with voice, presence and absence in the text. The debate mode turns on the absence of and longing for the « authentic » voice, paralleled by the absence of and longing for the love object. The debate form itself is, as Badel terms it, « un dialogue en récit » : the literary dialogue mediates the voices of the « acteurs », via the narrator figure¹. We as readers are presented with

¹ For the mediation of voice in the debate poem, see P.-Y. Badel, « Le Débat », *Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters* VIII:1, ed. by D. Poirion, Heidelberg, Carl Winter,

the ghost of a performance, reflected in the desire for presence/embodiment and intercourse that haunts the text². Debate poetry of the fifteenth century in France plays extensively on the gender relationships and voices it constructs and mediates within its confines. The boundaries are often blurred so that we ask questions familiar from earlier lyric poetry³. Is it indeed the voices of female interlocutors that we are hearing through the text? To what extent do male interlocutors adopt feminised positions within the text? Can voice in the text ultimately be pinned down as either male or female (and is this distinction in any way helpful)? Or does it, like the « puce », exist in a gender neutral space : the space of desire which is the absence at the heart of the text? In what follows, I begin to address these questions through an investigation of what I term the « voices of desire » within the debate poem, figured in the popular expression of my title.

According to Marcel Françon, Giuseppe di Stefano, Rose Bidler and Claude Duneton, the origins of our « expression grivoise » lie in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, where it signified the state of extreme anxiety and torment brought on by love, in other words, the state of sexual desire or arousal⁴. The motif of the flea later developed as a literary theme from the popularity of medieval and early modern songs about the wars between women and fleas, and the debate of the woman and the flea. It was elaborated in texts well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and beyond⁵. It is in its erotic context that it was predominantly used in the fifteenth-century debate poetry which is my focus here. The expression was occasionally divorced from this erotic context to signify unspecified torment and anguish. The modern French expression « avoir/mettre la puce à l'oreille » has by and large lost its sexual meaning, and come to signify something akin to « suspecting something » or « sowing the seed of doubt in someone's mind » : a sense of disquiet, though not

1988, p. 95-110, p. 98, and E. Cayley, *Debate and Dialogue : Alain Chartier in his Cultural Context*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 6-7.

² Not least in the multiple voices of « dead » authorities who return to « haunt » the text, as Helen Swift has observed with her theory of « spectropoetics » via Jacques Derrida's notion of « spectropolitics » : see H. J. Swift, *Gender, Writing, and Performance : Men Defending Women in Late Medieval France (1440-1538)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, esp. p. 33-38.

³ On questions of voice in earlier lyric poetry, see esp. S. Kay, *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

⁴ M. Françon, « Un Motif de la poésie amoureuse au XVI^e siècle », *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 56:2, 1941, p. 307-36, G. di Stefano, *Dictionnaire des locutions en moyen français*, Montreal, CERES, 1991, R. Bidler, *Dictionnaire érotique*, Montreal, CERES, 2002, p. 530-31, C. Duneton, *La Puce à l'oreille : anthologie des expressions populaires avec leur origine*, Paris, Livre de Poche, 1990, p. 58-64.

⁵ For the development of the flea motif in French literature, see M. Françon, art. cit. ; for discussion of late medieval French and German literature which stages debate trials between women and fleas, see H. J. Swift, *op. cit.*, p. 227-29. Patrizia Bettella looks at the Italian tradition and bodily infestation in her *The Ugly Woman : Transgressive Aesthetic Models in Italian Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 159-63.

the torment indicated by the medieval phrase⁶. For Jean de la Fontaine or Rabelais, among a host of other sixteenth and seventeenth century writers, the expression retained its erotic origins :

Elle ne dormit point durant toute la nuit,
Ne fit que s'agiter, et mena tant de bruit,
Que ni son père ni sa mere
Ne purent fermer la paupière
Un seul moment.
Ce n'était pas grande merveille :
Fille qui pense à son amant absent,
Toute la nuit, dit-on, a la puce à l'oreille,
Et ne dort que fort rarement.⁷

La Fontaine here points to the original connection of the expression with specifically female desire, though it is widely appropriated in the fifteenth century as an expression of male desire in the absence of the lady. A connection has long been made between the term « oreille » and the female genitalia ; via its comparison with the « coquille » or « coquillage », we note the common modern designation of particular shellfish : « oreilles-de-mer », « oreilles-de-Vénus » (abalone). In the context of our investigation into voice and desire in the text, Jacques Derrida's interest in the deferral of interpretation implied by the designation of « l'oreille de l'autre » may provide an illuminating perspective. A parallel emerges between the notions of the deferral of meaning (Derridean « différance ») and of satisfaction⁸. « C'est l'oreille de l'autre qui signe »⁹, Derrida writes. The voice is received by the ear of the other, and is interpreted at the point of reception rather than the point of origin. So both voice and desire require the presence of the other (interlocutor/narrator/love object) for interpretation/fulfilment. The promise of fulfilment is at once offered by the narrator/fellow interlocutor/s of the debate, and deferred through the absence of the desired interlocutor/love object. The slippage of meaning between the erotic and auditory receptive functions of « oreille » here provides a conceptual framework for my subsequent discussion of the expression in our debates.

In her *Dictionnaire érotique*, Rose Bidler points to the popular expressions attested in the fifteenth century in which « oreille » is used respectively as the male and female genitalia : « faire dresser l'oreille/les oreilles » (to be aroused, have an

⁶ In modern English, « a flea in one's ear » has a rather different meaning, defined as « a sharp rebuke, or reproof » (Oxford English Dictionary – OED).

⁷ Jean de la Fontaine, *Le Rossignol, contes et nouvelles en vers par Monsieur de La Fontaine*, Amsterdam, Pierre Brunel, 1709 ; see an online version at : <http://www.micheloud.com/FXM/Lafontaine/Rossignol.htm> .

⁸ See J. Derrida, *L'oreille de l'autre : otobiographies, transferts, traductions. Textes et débats avec Jacques Derrida*, ed. by C. Lévesque and C. V. McDonald, Montreal, VLB, 1982, *id.*, « L'Oreille de Heidegger : Philopolémologie (Geschlecht IV) », *Politiques de l'amitié*, Paris, Galilée, 1994.

⁹ J. Derrida, *op. cit.*, n. 7, 71-72.

erection); « en recevoir es oreilles » (to have sex [as a woman]). The former expression can be found in a number of debate poems of the fifteenth century. The following passage from the anonymous *Debat de la Damoiselle et de la Bourgeoise* employs the expression to indicate the state of arousal the narrator finds himself in upon waking, having spent the night, it is implied, in solitary sexual activity, inspired by the intense debate he has witnessed in a dream vision:

Alors comme tout esblouy
Tremblant [me] prins esmerveillier
Et du debat plus riens n'ouy
Si commamcé à m'esveiller¹⁰
Et à **dressier mon oreillier**¹¹
Qui avoit lors beaucoup affaire
Et diz pour une nuyt veiller
Que je reveleroye l'istoire.¹²

We come across the same expression in Guillaume Alexis's *Debat de l'omme mondain et du religieux*, in which the Ommе mondain enumerates the many delights of earthly existence and loves: « Amours font drecher les oreilles »¹³. His stern interlocutor, Le religieux, takes up the challenge and responds with a « jeu de mots », implicitly suggesting that sexual pleasure is shortlived:

Se tu as une joyeuseté
Mondaine, qui te viengne à point,
Tu auras cent picques de durté:
Joy mondaine ne dure point (*DOMR*, v. 61-64).

It is surely not difficult to see in the « cent picques de durté », the sharp pricks felt as the flea penetrates the fe/male body as well as the more obvious phallic analogy. Rabelais is one of the many French authors to employ the euphemisms « oreille »

¹⁰ The verb « esveiller » here may of course also be read with its erotic sense of arousal.

¹¹ This line is problematic: while it closely resembles the erotic expression « faire dresser les oreilles », the scribe has used the word « oreillier » (pillow), perhaps in error, or as a sanitisation of the passage.

¹² *Debat de la Damoiselle et de la Bourgeoise*, v. 641-48. For an edition of this debate, see E. Cayley, *Sleepless Knights and Wanton Women, vol 1: The Debate Poems*, Arizona, MRTS, forthcoming; for further discussion of this debate, see also « 'Le chapperon tousjours dure': The Language of Ageing Desire in the *Debat de la damoiselle et de la bourgeoise* and *Debat du viel et du jeune* », *Essays in Later Medieval French Literature: The Legacy of Jane H.M. Taylor*, ed. by R. Dixon, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010, p. 71-87. As I note in the above article (p. 81), two of the seven manuscripts of this debate substitute the line « Si commençay à moy/me habiller » for « (Si) commamcé à m'esveiller », suggesting the narrator's hasty dressing following a sexual encounter.

¹³ Guillaume Alexis, *Debat de l'omme mondain et du religieux*, v. 56. All references are to my forthcoming edition and English translation: E. Cayley, *Sleepless Knights*. Subsequent references to *DOMR* will be incorporated in the text.

and « petit doigt » to indicate the female genitalia and the phallus respectively. His *Tiers Livre* literalises the « puce en l'oreille » metaphor. Panurge pierces his ear and suspends a black flea from a golden hoop : « J'ay (respondit Panurge) la pusse en l'aureille. Je me veulx marier »¹⁴. « Si l'oreille vous demange et vous le grattez de vostre petit doigt, qui a plus de plaisir et de bien ? », asks Beroalde de Verville in the satirical *Le Moyen de parvenir* from 1610¹⁵.

The male protagonists of Alain Chartier's vastly popular *Debat Reveille Matin* (c.1423), and of the *Debat de l'omme mondain et du religieux*, attributed to Guillaume Alexis (c.1450), both cite the expression « avoir puce en l'oreille » to express frustrated desire, and here it refers specifically to male desire. However, the male interlocutors of our poems are cast in a feminised role, through their appropriation of the female « oreille ». Thus not only are women's voices excluded from the debate, but the male interlocutors usurp female subject positions to console one another. Sexual desire is satisfied in intercourse of a different nature between men. In the first of our quotations, the narrator uses the pronoun « on » to suggest, I think, not a universal feeling, but one reserved for the « nous » of this poem : the three male interlocutors and an implied male audience.

L'Acteur

Après myenuyt **entre deux sommes**,
 Lors qu'Amours les amans **esveille**,
 En ce paÿs cy où nous sommes,
 Pensoye où lit, **ainsi qu'on vueille**
Quant on a la puce en l'oreille ;
 Si escoutay deux amoureux,
 Dont l'un à l'autre se conseille
 Du mal dont il est douloureux.¹⁶

Similarly, the *Omme mondain* of Alexis' debate uses the term to refer to male « amans », those (« ceulx ») who serve a particular « demoiselle ». Unusually here the *Omme mondain* plays up the positive side of the flea-induced torment in his attempts to persuade his interlocutor of the pleasures of earthly love. As one might suspect, this is one expression that is very easy for *Le religieux* to turn to his advantage :

¹⁴ François Rabelais, *Le Tiers Livre*, ed. by P. Michel, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, ch. VII, p. 142-48.

¹⁵ See B. de Verville, *Le Moyen de parvenir*, Paris, Garnier, 1896. Further medieval and early modern expressions from Bidler's *Dictionnaire érotique* include : « secouer les pulces a une femme » (to have sex with a woman), « je la trouverois mieux dans un lict qu'une pulce » (I would rather find *her* in my bed than a flea, i.e. to find a woman desirable).

¹⁶ Alain Chartier, *Debat Reveille Matin*, v. 1-8. All references are to my forthcoming edition and English translation : E. Cayley, *Sleepless Knights*. Subsequent references to *DRM* will be incorporated in the text.

Le mondain

Au regard de moy, je ne pense
 Fors à vestir robe nouvelle,
 Me trouver en feste, où l'en dance
 Pour servir quelque damoiselle ;
Ceux qui ont la puce en l'oreille
 N'ont besoing que de joye et rire ;
 Car vente, pleuve, gresle ou gelle,
 À cueur joyeux rien ne peut nuyre (*DOMR*, v. 81-88).

The male lovers of these poems, and others like them, are assailed by Amours, via the domna who takes on the role of « puce »; they are feminised through their suffering, and, it is implied, their penetration by « puce ». In later sixteenth and seventeenth century literature, as we shall see, the male puce breaks free of the « oreille » of the expression, so to speak, and roams freely, uninvited, around his mistress's body and the text. Here, « puce » and his wanderings become a sinister parody of classical man-to-beast metamorphosis, and figure the author's (sub)conscious desire to rape his mistress. The literary « puce » then appears to acquire a certain sexual ambivalence and indeterminacy, enabling it to take on both male and female identities, even as « oreille » refuses an absolute sexual identity. « Puce » enters both male and female bodies, and leaves them tormented and unsatisfied¹⁷. In Chartier's debate, this unfulfilled desire leads to sleeplessness and engagement in dialogue for both interlocutors ; in Alexis' it is sublimated in religion. In both cases, whether cast as « puce » or « oreille », male desire and the male voice are foregrounded, in the absence both of the female voice and any indication of female desire.

European writers have long constructed a literary circus around the flea, drawing on such bloodthirsty and obscene avatars as the pseudo-Ovidian transformation poem, the *Elegia de pulice* (Elegy on the flea), which was influential in the later Middle Ages, and enjoyed vast popularity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries¹⁸. The poet-pulex of this short elegy leaves little to the imagination as he engages on his carnal assault of the female body, desiring transformation into his « disagreeable » enemy :

And when you further fix your sharp hidden piercer into her side, the maid is driven to rise out of her deep sleep. And about the lap will you wander ; there, to you, ways are open to other members [...] And meanwhile you have dared to broach even the passionate parts, and to taste the pleasures born in those places. May I perish if I do

¹⁷ I am grateful to Jane Gilbert for her illuminating suggestion of the « puce » as gender neutral « part-object » in a Žižekian sense (via Melanie Klein and Lacan's « objet petit a ») at the British Branch conference of the ICLS, Cambridge, April 2009. See S. Žižek, *Organs without Bodies : On Deleuze and Consequences*, London/New York, Routledge, 2003.

¹⁸ On the flea motif in European and Arabic literature, see M. Françon, art. cit.

not desire to be immediately transformed into my enemy, so that the means will be open to my desires.¹⁹

From Nature's speech in the *Roman de la Rose*²⁰, Deschamps, Charles d'Orléans, Villon²¹, Bruscambille²², Rabelais and Ronsard²³, to Estienne Pasquier and Catherine des Roches²⁴, to Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*²⁵, or John Donne's metaphysical *carpe diem* poem « The Flea »²⁶, and the famous series of seventeenth-century Flea-Hunt paintings²⁷, flea-ridden literature is more widespread than even I anticipated. The ever changing bug (a flea, fly, louse, bee or sometimes a mosquito (*culex*)) awakens new passions in its successive literary hosts. This « colonising parasite » becomes the subject of Ovidian transformation narratives of his own in which he is linked to a classical heritage of lovers who have literally given in to their bestial side (Leda's swan, Europa's bull, and so on). The flea motif in sixteenth and seventeenth century literature tends to associate the flea with the male lover, exploring, and indeed viciously attacking the body of the helpless female, whom the lover-puce

¹⁹ *Elegia de pulice, Poetae Latini Minores*, ed. by N. E. Le Maire, Paris, Lemaire, 1826, VII, p. 275-78. English translation by H. D. Brumble, « John Donne's 'The Flea': Some Implications of the Encyclopedic and Poetic Flea Traditions », *Critical Quarterly*, 15, 1973, p. 147-54.

²⁰ Thanks to Jonathan Morton for the reference here : Nature describes a world where animals have the power to reason, explaining that men would be helpless to resist them. See Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. by A. Strubel, Paris, Librairie générale française, 1992, v. 17845-48 : « Neïs puces et oreillies / S'eles s'erent entorteillies, / En dormant, dedenz leur oreilles, / Les greveroient a merveilles ».

²¹ See G. Di Stefano, *op. cit.*, for instances of the expression in Deschamps, Charles d'Orléans and François Villon.

²² Thanks to Hugh Roberts for the reference to *Des Puces*, a delightful argument between two fleas in Bruscambille's *Les Nouvelles et plaisantes imaginations de Bruscambille* [...], Paris, François Huby, 1613.

²³ *Folastrie* VI (1553), « Que pleust à Dieu que je puisse / Pour un soir devenir puce », also the sonnet « Ha, Seigneur dieu, que de graces écloses », in P. Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. P. Laumonier, Paris, Hachette, 1928, V, p. 38, 110, and *Les Amours* XX (1552), « Je voudroy bien richement jaunissant » : P. Ronsard, *Les Amours*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1981, p. 67.

²⁴ For Estienne Pasquier and Catherine Des Roches' poetic contributions to a literary contest staged around the motif of the flea, see *La Puce de Madame Des Roches, qui est un recueil de divers poèmes Grecs, Latins et François. Composez pars plusieurs doctes personages aux Grands Jours tenus à Poitiers l'an MDLXXIX*, Paris, Abel l'Angelier, 1582-83.

²⁵ See Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*, Harlow, Longman, 2003.

²⁶ See John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by A. J. Smith, New York, Penguin, 1986.

²⁷ See B. Wind, 'Close Encounters of the Baroque Kind : Amatory Paintings by Terbrugghen, Baburen and La Tour', *Studies in Iconography*, 4, 1978, p. 115-22, J. F. Moffitt, « La Femme à la puce : The Textual Background of Seventeenth-Century Painted Flea-Hunts », *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1987, p. 99-103.

hopes to « depuceler » : « I am like to Ovid's flea ; I can creep into every corner of a wench »²⁸.

Male desire thus appropriates the flea in the early modern period, just as in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in spite of the original semantic association of the expression « avoir la puce en l'oreille » with female voices of desire, as I suggested. The painters of the subject took pleasure in the metaphor of paintbrush as pulex-phallus and, just as the writer's pen or the spectator's gaze, in exploring every corner of the « wench ». As such, the flea is part of a proud upstanding classical and medieval tradition of literature about « phallic » animals and pets belonging to or associated with women, such as Catullus' lament for Lesbia's dead sparrow, or Jean Lemaire de Belges' account of his lady's dead parrot in the *Épîtres de l'Amant vert*²⁹. As Olson states in his article on Catherine Des Roches' transformations of the flea motif, « the expression puce à l'oreille, signifies both the passage of the flea and an irritability and disquiet associated with sexual arousal constructed as a discomfort to be relieved by phallic penetration »³⁰. However, there are some rare exceptions, specifically Catherine Des Roches in her contribution to the well-known collaborative poetic collection *La Puce de Madame Des Roches* (1583), initiated by Estienne Pasquier. Des Roches operates a reversal of the traditional male-on-female pattern of desire by establishing herself as both « puce » and « pucelle », emphasizing the gendered article « la puce » : « Puce, quand vous estiez pucelle ». Word play on the substantives « puce » and « pucelle » (« puce » / « pucelle » / « pucelage » / « depuceler ») was frequent in the poetic flea tradition, as can be seen from Estienne Pasquier's challenge to Catherine :

Tu [puce] la piques [et] elle craint, pour ne rien celer, que c'est la depuceler, et bannir à jamais d'elle ce cruel nom de pucelle. [...] Pleust or à Dieu que je pusse seulement devenir Puce. [...] Et partant, Puce pucette, je veus, Puce pucelette, petite Puce, je veus adresser vers toy mes veus. [...] C'est que Madame par toy se puisse esveiller pour moy, que pour moy elle s'esveille et ayt la Puce en l'oreille.³¹

Note the use of the verb « esveiller » here in its double sense, to arouse from sleep and to arouse sexually. The sleeplessness our interlocutors are subject to, frequently described using the verbs « esveiller » or « veiller », makes full use of this double meaning, as we observed earlier in the *Debat de la Damoiselle et de la Bourgeoise*.

²⁸ Marlowe's personification of *Pride*, C. Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*, op. cit., v. 111.

²⁹ See Gaius Valerius Catullus, *The Poems of Catullus : A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. by P. Green, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, A. Armstrong, « Is This an Ex-Parrot ? The Printed Afterlife of Jean Lemaire de Belges' *Épîtres de l'Amant vert* », *Journal de la Renaissance*, 5, 2007, p. 323-36.

³⁰ T. P. Olson, « La Femme à la Puce et la Puce à l'oreille : Catherine Des Roches and the Poetics of Sexual Resistance in Sixteenth-Century French Poetry », *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 32:2, 2002, p. 327-42, p. 337. See also C. Yandell, « Of Lice and Women : Rhetoric and Gender in *La Puce de Madame Des Roches* », *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 20, 1990, p. 123-35.

³¹ Estienne Pasquier, *La Puce de Madame Des Roches* (1583), op. cit., p. 20-22.

Chartier's *Debat Reveille Matin* was almost as popular as his *Belle Dame sans mercy*, with 37 manuscripts recorded by Laidlaw³². This great popularity, as evidenced by the manuscript transmission, would no doubt surprise partisans of Hoffmann's 1942 classification of Chartier's work into the «joyeuses escriptures» and the serious poems. In his category of «joyeuses escriptures», Hoffmann classifies both Chartier's *DRM* and his *BDSM*³³. Critics are now starting to agree on the *Belle Dame*'s significance as a feminine and patriotic icon of autonomy and freedom, and have begun to look at the *DRM* in connection with the «Querelle de la *BDSM*», and the *BDSM* itself³⁴. The two poems, I suggest, are intimately connected. Intertextual correspondences with the *BDSM* and Chartier's anti-curial Latin letter *De vita curiali* expose the platitudes uttered by the Amoureux in the *DRM*³⁵. The two poems were certainly often read against one another in the manuscript tradition, as we will also see with Chartier's *DRM* and Guillaume Alexis' *Debat de l'homme mondain et du religieux*. The *BDSM* appears in 34 manuscripts with the *DRM*, and in 14 it is copied directly after it, reinforcing the textual play between the poems by locating them together in the material space of play that is the codex.

The *DRM* derives its premise from a proverb recorded by Morawski: «Ami pour aultre veille»³⁶, and seems ultimately to be more concerned with the ethical duty of loyalty to one's friends than with lovers' anecdotes. The narrator of Chartier's *DRM* is lying awake after midnight, «entre deulx sommes», awakened by thoughts of his lady, when he overhears a lover, Amoureux, trying to rouse a sleeper, Dormeur, in the same room: the two interlocutors of the debate. Here we have three sleepless knights: the clerkly would-be lover who records the debate, the Amoureux, and the hapless Dormeur. The parallel implicit here, of course, is that of the sleepless night of love or love-making, which none of the three men is able to achieve. The male narrator remarks at the close of the *DRM* that he has written down the debate in order to become more friendly with Dormeur and Amoureux: «Si mis en escript ce qu'ilz dirent / Pour mieulx estre de leur butin» (*DRM*, v. 365-66). This use of «butin» is attested in the literature since at least 1350 as a currency of exchange (spoils), and points to the notion of a Kosofsky-esque traffic in women,

³² I make it 38 MSS, as opposed to 44, for the *Belle Dame sans mercy*, 34 of which belong to the *Belle Dame* tradition (37 of these collect the *DRM* with the *BDSM*). The additional manuscript is Turin, Bibl. Naz. Univ., L. IV. 3 (fols. 64-68), unfortunately destroyed in a fire in 1904. For details of the manuscript tradition and an edition, see Alain Chartier, *The Poetical Works of Alain Chartier*, ed. by J. C. Laidlaw, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 305-306, and *Le Cycle de la Belle Dame sans mercy*, ed. by D. F. Hult and J. E. McRae, Paris, Champion, 2003, p. 439-71, as well as my forthcoming edition of poetic debates, *Sleepless Knights*.

³³ See E. J. Hoffman, *Alain Chartier, His Works and Reputation*, Geneva, Slatkine, 1975, 1st ed., 1975, p. 39-43.

³⁴ See E. Cayley, *Debate and Dialogue*, p. 110-121, and *Chartier in Europe*, ed. by E. Cayley and A. Kinch, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2008.

³⁵ I have developed this argument elsewhere; see E. Cayley, *Debate and Dialogue*, p. 129-33.

³⁶ See J. Morawski, *Proverbes français antérieurs au XV^e siècle*, Paris, Champion, 1925, n° 81.

but gives it a curious twist³⁷. Here, words are the currency of male exchange, and it is through male words and voices that women are to be won. However, women are never part of the « butin » in the *Debat Reveille Matin* ; what is won and played for by the « impotent » knights is essentially male companionship and conversation as a substitute for action, love and a woman to keep one awake all night. Here « butin » represents a displacement activity engaged in by those too cowardly, impotent or sleepy to go to love or war.

There is, to my mind, at least, an eroticised transference that operates here between the longing for a hypothetical absent female and the relationship of the two interlocutors with one another and with the narrator, Kosofsky's notion of the homosocial bond. After all, the primary reason that the narrator and the Dormeur are « éveillés », with the double sense of being kept up, is not the absence of the female, but the presence of the male. Again we see how female speakers are excluded from this debate, while men express and satisfy their desires via the « oreille de l'autre » :

« Ha Dieu ! », dist l'Amoureux, « Beau sire,
Tel vouldist dormir qui sommeille
Tel ploure qui bien vouldist rire,
Et tel cuide dormir qui veille.
Non pour tant Bonne Amour conseille
Et bien souvent le dit on bien :
Qu'un bon amy pour l'autre veille,
Au gré d'aultruy non pas au sien » (*DRM*, v. 33-40).

We find the same proverb in Alexis' *Debat de l'omme mondain*, this time deployed by the Omme mondain, who corresponds to Chartier's Amoureux figure in his evocation of the service one owes to one's friends :

Le mondain
J'ay intencion d'acquerir
De grans amis qu'il que le vueille
Pour mē aider et secourir :
Ung bon amy pour l'autre veille (*DOMR*, v. 229-32).³⁸

Here, though, Omme mondain's dour interlocutor, Le religieulx, rejects this service as belonging to a world which he has escaped, and which Omme mondain must now relinquish. In refusing to acknowledge the existence of sincere friendship or love in the world (« Il ne se fault fier qu'en Dieu », v. 240), Le religieulx enforces his role as Omme mondain's superior and his position outside the courtly game of love and the realm of Amours. Alexis' poem is clearly inflected through Chartier's *DRM* ; the relationship of Omme mondain and Le religieulx is calqued on that of the Amoureux and Dormeur of Chartier's poem. Alexis' poem intensifies this relationship by

³⁷ See E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men : English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985.

³⁸ This proverb is the premise for Chartier's *DRM* (v. 39); see E. Cayley, *Debate and Dialogue*, p. 129-31.

removing the narrator figure from the equation. *Omme mondain* and *Le religieux* dominate the whole poem, each sticking largely to his own arguments: the joys versus the vanities of earthly life and loves, until a rapid and total volte face by *Omme mondain*, who goes from praising the joys of spring to the sudden realization of his own mortality in the face of *Le religieux*'s deployment of standard *contemptus mundi* topoi:

– Amy, quand bien digereras
Qu'il convient une foiz mourir,
Toutes ses folies oublieras (*DOMR*, v. 441-3).

Like the *Amoureux* of Chartier's *DRM*, *Omme mondain* both trusts and takes his friend's advice:

Mon amy, ton parler me inspire,
Et congnois que (tu) dis verité;
Et desormais ne me vueil reduire:
Crainte fait changer volonté (*DOMR*, v. 453-56).

I suggest that there is a strong thematic and linguistic connection between the expressions « un (bon) amy pour l'autre veille » and our « puce en l'oreille », both of which we have seen deployed in the *DRM* and the *DOMR* (*DRM*, v. 39, *DOMR*, v. 231; *DRM*, v. 5, *DOMR*, v. 85). Both suggest the wakeful state in which lovers or friends find themselves, tormented by exhaustion on the one hand, and by desire on the other. A slippage between the two expressions, between friends and lovers, may lead us to read these friendships between male interlocutors and narrators or « amis » as erotically charged. As we have seen, the rhyming pairs of « oreille-veille/esveille », « oreille-resveille » are frequent. Instances of the expression « puce en l'oreille » and other expressions connected with « oreille » tend in the fifteenth century to signal awakening or insomnia of some kind. This state of extreme wakefulness cannot be divorced from its erotic context, as I have shown: from a desire for intercourse both physical and verbal.

Talking the night away in the *DRM* seems a reasonable substitute for action, but the suggestion of impotence surely lies not too far beneath the surface. This sexual or amatory impotence and inability to communicate with women is certainly linked in Chartier's work to the more specific impotence and cowardice of the knight or chevalier in time of war. Impotence in love, speech and war is a set of motifs that links our *Amoureux* to the lacklustre *Amant* of Chartier's *BDSM*. For the *Amoureux* and the *Dormeur*, just as for the male narrators of the other debates under consideration here, a lady is merely a voiceless pawn in their homosocial exchange. She is an excuse for male intercourse: an object but not a speaking subject of the debate. This is the « traffic in women » of which Kosofsky Sedgwick speaks in her seminal work on the topic³⁹. Here we see not so much René Girard's schematised erotic triangle, but a male narrative triangle from which the female is forcibly excluded and absent: she has no narrative voice in the debate, and no specific

³⁹ E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *op. cit.*

identity. The men are all rivals for an illusory love, but, as Girard and Kosofsky Sedgwick would suggest, it is their own bonds that are reinforced by the debate; the elusive dames are symbolic property « for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men »⁴⁰.

An interesting parallel occurs here with a similar fifteenth-century amatory debate that stages the conversation between two ladies of the court, the *Debat de la Noire et de la Tannee*, overheard by an eavesdropping male narrator⁴¹. We are told that the version of the debate we are reading is that mediated by the narrator's voice, who allegedly copied the ladies' speeches « telles quelles » from his hiding place, and then inserted them into his written version later. The words of the two primary speakers are reinterpreted by the narrator in his account of the debate, thereby calling into question the « authenticity » of the female voices we are hearing. In spite of the narrator's description of the ladies' excellence as makers of poetry, we observe how he has usurped their authorial role as speakers of their own verse, undermining their position as speaking subjects within the debate. The simultaneous affirmation and undermining of the ladies' poetic talents and voices is figured in the poem by the motif of colour, and particularly by the colour and the flower violet. The narrator's insistence on the colour violet is felt in paratextual aspects of the debate's reception, too, with the ladies' violet trim and lining represented in miniatures from Paris, Rothschild 2798 and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 25420, as well as the violets which appear in the border of the BnF miniature⁴². As Sylvia Huot argues in her article on the significance of the « marguerite » or daisy in medieval French literature, the flower « tends to replace » the lady as a prize

⁴⁰ See R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel : Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. by Y. Freccero, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1972. See also Lacan's discussion of the triangulation of the gaze : J. Lacan, *Les Quatre Concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse : le séminaire XI*, Paris, Seuil Points, 1990, and Simon Gaunt's reading of Lacan in S. Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 182-83.

⁴¹ See my edition of this debate in *Sleepless Knights*, forthcoming, and my discussion, « Debate after Alain Chartier : Authority and Materiality in the *Debat de la Noire et de la Tannee* », *Mythes à la cour, mythes pour la cour*, ed. by J.-C. Mühlethaler and J.-Y. Tilliette, Geneva, Droz, 2010, p. 311-21. See also Olivier Delsaux's edition, *Je meurs de soif empres le puy. Le debat de la noire et de la tannée*, ed. by O. Delsaux, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2006, and his articles on the *Noire et tannée* : « Du debat à l'esbat. Le debat de la noire et de la tannée : une définition en jeu », *CAMAREN. Cahiers Moyen Âge-Renaissance*, 1: *Jugement par esbatement*, 2006, p. 105-118, « (D)ebat pour recueil en noir majeur. La supériorité du ms.-recueil sur le ms. d'auteur pour l'approche d'un texte poétique en moyen français », *Le recueil à la fin du moyen âge. La fin du Moyen Âge*, ed. by T. Van Hemelryck and C. Thiry, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, p. 101-111, and « *Le Debat de la noire et de la tannée*. À la recherche d'un signalement », forthcoming in *Romania*.

⁴² There are three manuscript witnesses : Paris, BnF, fr. 25420 (fols. 1-21), Paris, BnF, Rothschild 2798 (fols. 1-22), and Chantilly, Musée Condé, 685 (fols. 123-38^v). The Chantilly manuscript does not have any illustration, and is a compilation manuscript ; the other two manuscripts are monotextual.

for poetry or a love token given to the male poet-protagonist⁴³. The emblematic use of the flower : rose, violet or daisy as a metaphor for love or for the love object in courtly literature, displaces the woman and her individual voice⁴⁴. In the case of the *Noire et Tannee*, it is the creative hand that displaces the women at the heart of the metaphor, as Jane Taylor has observed in the case of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Rose*⁴⁵. Rose always and emphatically remains a flower, in the same way that Rose and Violette, the two nominal protagonists of Jean Froissart's 1392 debate, the *Plaidoirie de la Rose et de la Violette*, remain silent and flowery⁴⁶. De Lorris' and de Meun's *Rose*, and Froissart's Rose and Violette are deprived of speaking subject status in the same way that Noire and Tannee have their « libre arbitre » as poetic subjects and makers of text stolen from them by the male narrator who turns them into poetic objects in his own composition. My evocation of this debate between women demonstrates the extent to which the female voice is elided in debate poetry of this era. Even in instances where women are « present » as characters within the text, then, their voices must remain elusive and absent.

Le Debat de l'homme mondain et du religieux, written around 1450, and attributed to the well-known poet and prior Guillaume Alexis, takes as its theme the *contemptus mundi*. This is a theme it shares with the anonymous *Amant rendu cordelier à l'observance d'Amours* (c. 1440)⁴⁷, a debate attached to the « Querelle de la BDSM » and which *L'Homme mondain* follows closely. Both poems are steeped in the language of play and game – a language that often accompanies reflection on death or the *memento mori* in fifteenth century poetry⁴⁸.

The narrator of *L'Amant rendu cordelier*, lulled to sleep by the sound of a chambermaid singing, dreams that he is transported by a whirlwind (*ARC*, v. 11-12) to the forest de Desesperance. Amours, answering his call for help, leads him with the help of a shining arrow to a magnificent Chapelle where he encounters the

⁴³ See S. Huot, « The Daisy and the Laurel : Myths of Desire and Creativity in the Poetry of Jean Froissart », *Yale French Studies*, 1991, p. 240-51, esp. p. 246-47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 246, for an account of the cult of the « marguerite », exemplified in the poetry of Machaut, Froissart, Deschamps and Chaucer.

⁴⁵ See J. H. M Taylor, « Embodying the Rose : An Intertextual Reading of Alain Chartier's *La Belle Dame Sans Mercy* », *The Court Reconvenes : Courtly Literature Across the Disciplines*, ed. by B. K. Altmann and C. W. Carroll, Cambridge, 2003, p. 325-43.

⁴⁶ See Jean Froissart, *Plaidoirie de la Rose et de la Violette*, « Dits » et « Débats », ed. by A. Fourrier, Geneva, 1979.

⁴⁷ *L'Amant rendu cordelier à l'observance d'amours*, ed. by A. de Montaiglon, Paris, Firmin-Didot, 1881. Subsequent references to *ARC* will be incorporated in the text. This poem was attributed to Martial d'Auvergne by Lenglet-Dufresnoy in the 1731 Amsterdam edition of the *Arrêts d'amours*, and subsequently by A. de Montaiglon and W. Söderhjelm, *Anteckningar om Martial d'Auvergne och hans Kärleksdommar*, Helsingfors, 1889, but see Arthur Piaget's discussion : « *La Belle Dame sans merci* et ses imitations », *Romania*, 34, 1905, p. 416-23. The claim for authorship based solely on the similarities of expression of *arrêt* XXXVII and *ARC* is doubtful given that Martial d'Auvergne is probably not the author of the *Arrêts*, and given the common reservoir of images drawn on by poets of the *BDSM* cycle.

⁴⁸ On death in medieval French poetry, see J. H. M. Taylor, *Dies Illa : Death in the Middle Ages*, Liverpool, Francis Cairns Publications, 1984, and S. Gaunt, *op. cit.*

sorrowing lover, and observes the gradual process of the lover's conversion by the austere Damp Prieur (echoed in Alexis's *Le religieux*). Crucially, we again come across our « puce en l'oreille », not once but twice. In the first, Dangier, in the guise of the pulex (« puce »), asserts his protection of the « pucelle's » « oreille », while roused or aroused by thoughts of his own wanderings in that area :

Damp Prieur

– Raison est souvent endormie,
Mais jamais Dangier **ne sommeille**
Ne ne dort heure ne demie ;
Tousjours a la puce en l'oreille,
Il court, il se trouve, il travaille,
Pour guerrier jeunes et vieux ;
Il est bon mestier **qu'on y veille ;**
On ne demanderoit pas mieux (*ARC*, v. 345-52).

In the second, the passage of the flea is likened to a fever which can only be healed by the attentions and presence of his lady. This is a cure which the speakers of our debates desire, but never obtain, just as the debates themselves must remain inconclusive and open-ended. Desire here always implies the deferral of spoken/written judgement, and thus of verbal satisfaction :

Damp Prieur

– La fièvre si grant ne puet estre
Que, se d'aventure la belle
S'en vient de nuit a la fenestre
Voir le povre gallant, qui **veille**
Et qui a la puce en l'oreille,
Qu'il ne soit tost sur piés, guery
D'un brin de girofle vermeille,
S'elle luy jecte, tant soit marry (*ARC*, v. 729-36).

David Hult suggests that in the first instance the expression is used more in its sense of disquiet, anxiety; and in the second that it is deployed in an erotic context⁴⁹. I would tend to think that both instances here employ the phrase in specifically erotic contexts.

L'Homme mondain is copied directly after *L'Amant rendu cordelier* in three of the seven extant manuscripts. These three, The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 71 E 49, Paris, BnF, fr. 1642, et Vatican, Reg. Lat. 1720, are also attached to the « Querelle de la *BDSM* ». The texts of *L'Homme mondain* in the Vatican and The Hague manuscripts are very similar, but the preponderance of scribal errors in the Vatican exemplar leads me to hypothesise that the Vatican *Homme mondain* is a copy of The Hague⁵⁰. The texts collected in The Hague manuscript reinforce the notion of

⁴⁹ See *Le Cycle de la Belle Dame sans mercy*, ed. by D. F. Hult and J. E. McRae, p. 441.

⁵⁰ For further discussion of these manuscripts and their relationship, see E. Cayley, « Polyphonie et dialogisme : espaces ludiques dans le recueil manuscrit à la fin du Moyen

the dialogue of life and death, or more precisely of love and death. We find, in addition to our flea-ridden *Amant rendu cordelier* and *Omme mondain*, an abundance of texts with titles such as « epitaph », « miroir » or « testament », and other didactic works such as Chartier's *Le Breviaire des nobles*. *La Dance macabre des femmes* follows *L'Omme mondain* here, and is copied with *La Dance macabre des femmes et des hommes* in two other anthology manuscripts : Paris, BnF, nouv. acq. fr. 10032 and Paris, BnF, fr. 25434. Death in this context figures the ultimate silencing/satisfying of the voices of desire beyond the bounds of the text.

Our « puce » continues to aggravate a number of different « oreilles » in the material context of the reception of Chartier and Alexis' poems with the « Querelle de la *BDSM* » poems, from the *Amant rendu cordelier*, as we have seen, to the *Confession et Testament de l'amant trespasé de deuil*⁵¹, and the *Inventaire de l'amant*⁵², or the vast printed lyric anthology of 1501, the *Jardin de Plaisance*⁵³. Close study of the expression « avoir la puce en l'oreille » has demonstrated how the ethics of courtly friendship are underwritten by the terms of erotic arousal and desire in late medieval poetry. Desire in our debates is the desire for intercourse – physical and verbal – with the object of desire. In many of the debate poems we have studied, it is male desire that is ultimately satisfied through verbal intercourse with men in the absence of the female speaker. Where the female is present, her role as speaking subject is often elided by the male who adopts a feminised position within the text. Gender difference in the puce-pucelle, poet-pulex dyads supposed by our erotic expression is confused and eroded. So the place of the « puce » in the text is a gender neutral space : one haunted by the spectres of textual desire. A slippage of meaning operates here between the erotic and auditory receptive functions of « oreille », as we have seen. Through the « oreille » of the text, as though across the permeable spaces of the trellis, we overhear the voice(s) of desire at the heart of the debate.

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Âge. Le cas de trois recueils poétiques du quinzième siècle », *Le Recueil à la fin du moyen âge. La fin du moyen âge*, ed. by T. Van Hemelryck and C. Thiry, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, p. 47-60.

⁵¹ Pierre de Hauteville, *La Confession et testament de l'amant trespasé de deuil*, ed. by R. M. Bidler, Montreal, CERES, 1982, v. 1009.

⁵² *Complainte de l'amant trespasé de deuil, et l'Inventaire des biens demourez du décès de l'amant trespasé de deuil*, ed. by R. M. Bidler, *Le Moyen Français*, 18, 1986, p. 11-104, v. 311.

⁵³ *Jardin de plaisance et fleur de rethorique*, ed. in facsimile by E. Droz and A. Piaget, 2 vols., Paris, Firmin-Didot, 1910-25, I: *facsimile*; II: *introduction and notes*. See vol. I, fol. CCXXXIII.